



Young People's Attitudes to Minority Ethnic Groups and Asylum Seeking

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Introduction

Few policy issues are as emotionally charged and complex as asylum seeking and migration. Asylum seeking raises both individual and community concerns which, arguably, need to be addressed at societal and international levels. It has humanitarian, moral, security and development dimensions, and is, increasingly, becoming an environmental and natural resources issue (Hakovirta 1993).

A survey undertaken by the Pew Research Center (2019) in 18 countries who are hosting half of the world's refugee and asylum seekers populations found that the majority of respondents in the top ten countries hosting migrant populations, including the US, Germany, the UK, France, Canada and Australia, regarded migrants as a strength rather than a burden in their country. However, participants over 50 years of age had more reservations towards migrant populations than younger people, the latter being more appreciative of the contributions that these groups made to society. A survey undertaken by Ipsos in 26 countries (2019) cross the continents found that six in ten people agreed on the right of refugees and asylum seekers to be included in their societies, and four in ten thought that they would successfully integrate within society.

Given the significance, complexity and urgency of these issues, understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants within their host communities is becoming an increasingly important task for policy makers (ODI, 2017).

Who are refugees and asylum seekers?

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention of United Nations, a refugee is, in short, a person who due to fear of being persecuted is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country; or who is, due to fear, unable or unwilling to return to it (UNHCR, 2016 & OHCHR, 2021). Refugees receive a number of protections under international law. The most important is the right to non-deportation whereby countries are prohibited from transferring or removing individuals from their jurisdiction if it is believed that the person would be at risk of irreparable harm upon their return. The 1951 Refugee Convention also accords other rights including the rights to education, employment, healthcare, and freedom of movement (UNHCR USA, 2016).

An asylum-seeker is a person seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but has not been legally recognised as a refugee and is awaiting a decision on their asylum claim. This means that everyone should be allowed to enter another country to seek asylum, as seeking asylum is a human right. However, an asylum seeker must demonstrate that their fear of persecution in their home country is well-founded.

Global context

The treatment of refugees in Europe came to the fore after the Second World War. This resulted in the signing of the Refugee Convention which was

extended in the 1967 Protocol to include the rest of the world. At the end of 2019, 79.5 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide, a figure that had increased from 70.8 million in 2009 (UNHCR, 2020), driven mainly by the Syrian conflict. However, conflicts in other regions including in Iraq, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and South Sudan also contributed to this increase, as well as the mass exodus of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh since the end of 2017. This unprecedented increase in the number of refugees and asylum seekers highlights the urgency for new policy measure to address these issues at a global stage.

Policy in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has currently no devolved policy and strategy on asylum seeking, with asylum and refugee laws being directed from the UK Home Office. However, in practice, several NI Departments are responsible for providing services to asylum seekers placed in Northern Ireland, including education and healthcare services. The 2009 ECNI report 'New Migration, Equality and Integration: Issues and Challenges for Northern Ireland' highlighted the views of the sector on the links between cohesion, integration and migration. The report emphasized that '*it is not possible to integrate migrants fully into society, if they are not given the same rights and freedoms as everyone else*'. Similarly, the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 (TEO, 2015) stated that the NI Executive aims to work towards an immigration policy that recognises and takes account of different needs

and concerns here. Research indicates that the Northern Ireland context with its complex cultural identities and intersecting politics, nationalism and religion (Lippard & McNamee 2021) is likely to impact on how well asylum seekers will be integrated in Northern Ireland.

This Research Update draws on data from the Young Life and Times survey (YLT), primarily the latest 2020/21 survey. Since 2004, questions on attitudes to minority ethnic groups and asylum seekers, funded by the Executive Office,

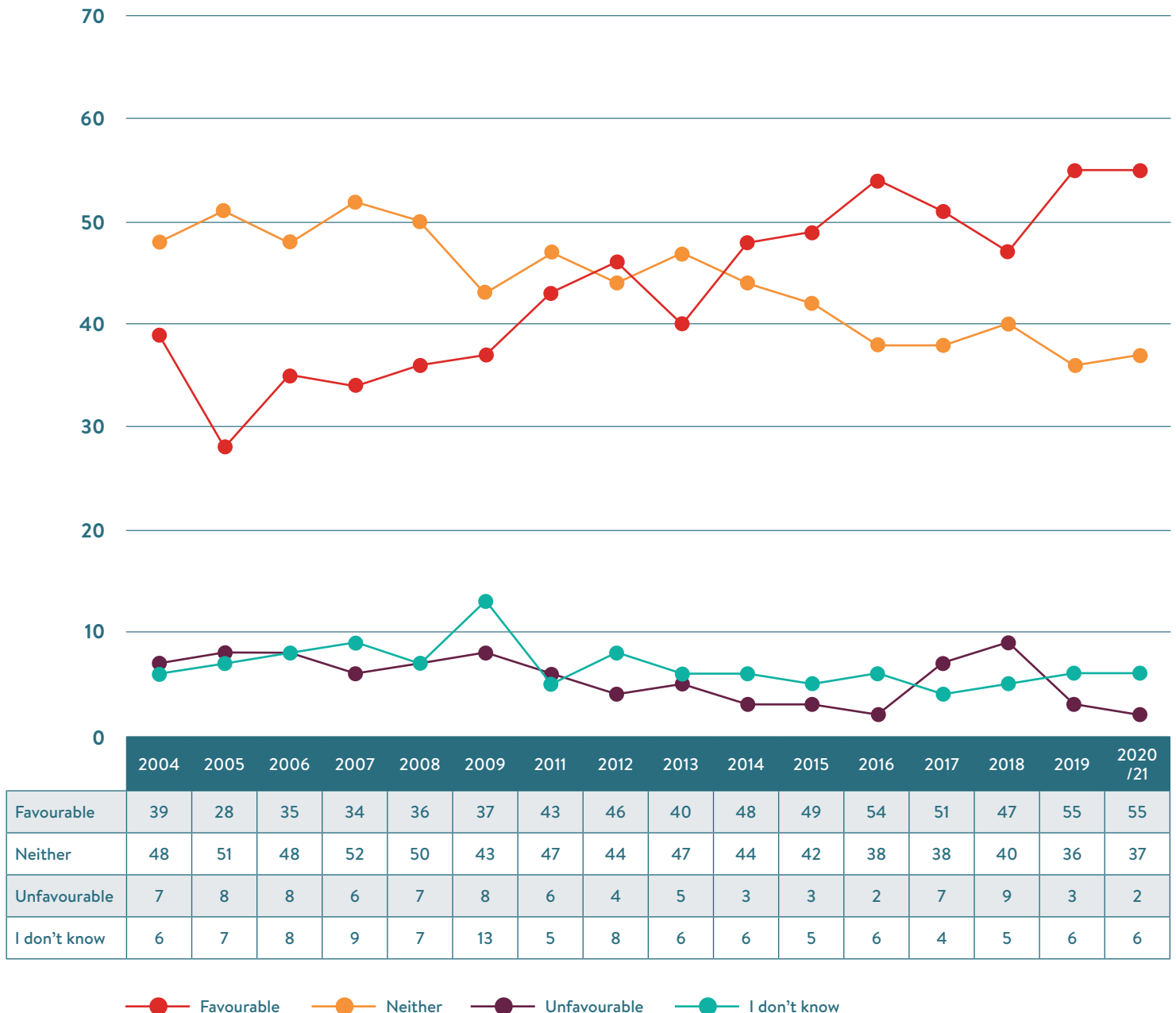
have been included in YLT. The survey elicits the views of 16 year olds living in Northern Ireland on a range of social and policy topics. The sample consists of randomly selected young people in Northern Ireland who celebrate their 16th birthday in the three months preceding the start of the survey.

Time series data on attitudes

Figure 1 shows that, over time, the proportion of YLT respondents who say they feel unfavourable towards people from minority ethnic communities

has declined. In the latest survey, only 2% of respondents said they felt quite unfavourable or very unfavourable towards people from minority ethnic communities. Protestant respondents have consistently been somewhat less likely to express positive attitudes than respondents with Catholic or no religious backgrounds. In the most recent survey, 63% of Catholics compared to 55% of Protestants said they felt quite favourable or very favourable towards people from minority ethnic communities.

Figure 1: How favourable or unfavourable do you feel about people from minority ethnic communities? (%)



From 2017 onwards, YLT respondents were asked if they felt that people from different minority ethnic groups added to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland society. Every year just over half of respondents - in 2020/21 the figure was 52% - agreed or strongly agreed that they did. Catholic respondents were consistently most likely to agree with this statement, followed by respondents with no religious background and Protestant respondents (58%, 51% and 45% respectively in the YLT survey in 2020/21).

Self-assessed prejudice

Since 2014, YLT has asked respondents on an annual basis to self-assess their

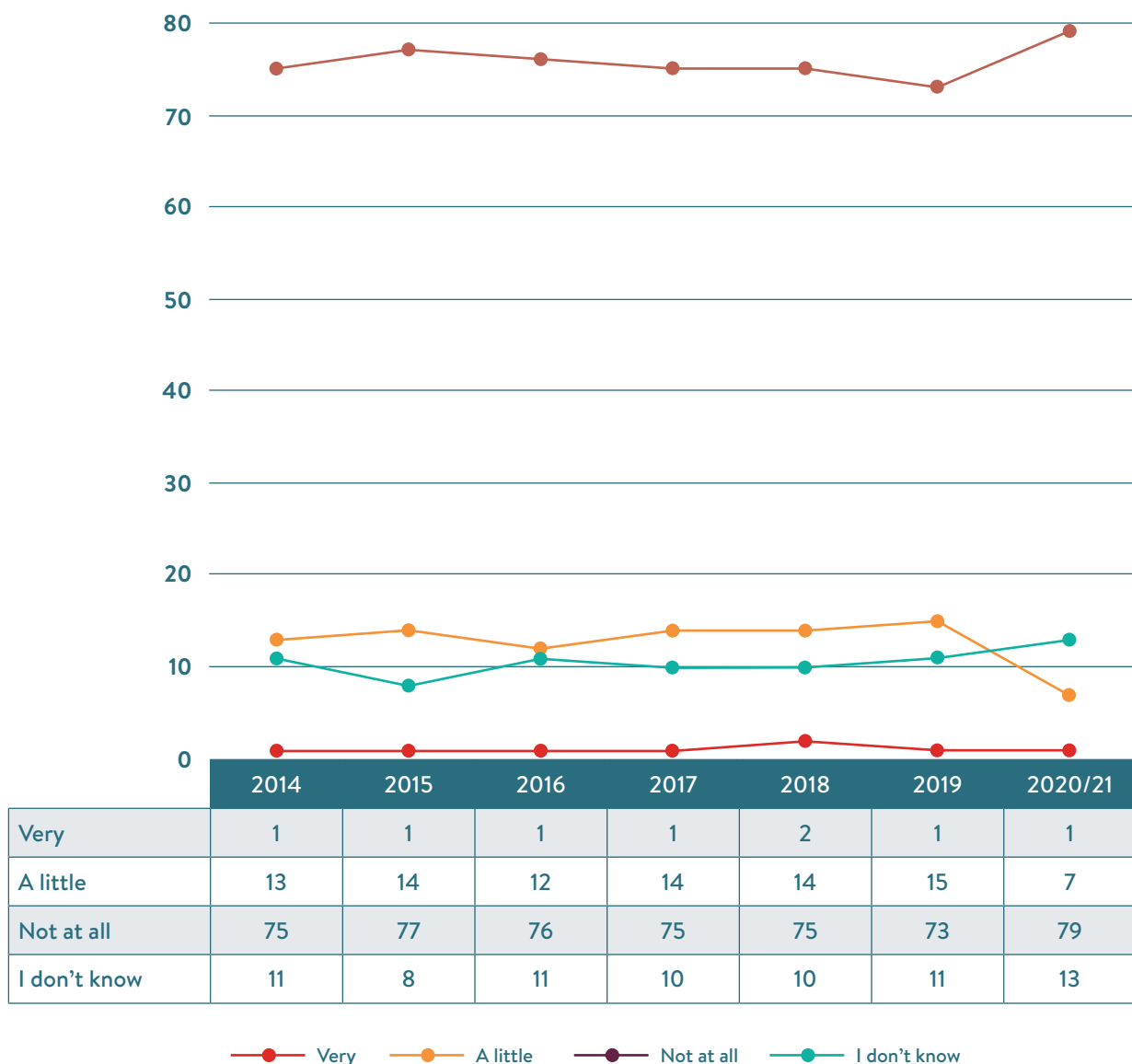
prejudice against people from different ethnic backgrounds. Figure 2 shows that only about 1 in 100 16-year olds describe themselves as very prejudiced against people from minority ethnic communities. Approximately three quarters of respondents in each survey year described themselves as not at all prejudiced.

When asked why they think they are prejudiced, the survey respondents often referred to the way they were brought up, the lack of contact opportunities, the way stereotypes are fostered in the media, the influence of peers and others around them and generally underlying institutional racism in society. The following quote from

one of the respondents in the 2020/21 survey reflects these sentiments, but also the desire to learn more about minority ethnic groups and their culture:

'I do not mean to be prejudiced, and I think that it is important that no racism etc. or bullying happens, but subconsciously considering my upbringing and not being exposed to people of other ethnic backgrounds, I think I have biases against them without even meaning to, which is why I think it is so important to from a very young age expose children to minorities of any shape or form to build up a level of normality that isn't here currently.'

Figure 2: Would you describe yourself as very prejudiced against people from minority ethnic communities, a little prejudiced, or not prejudiced at all? By survey year (%).



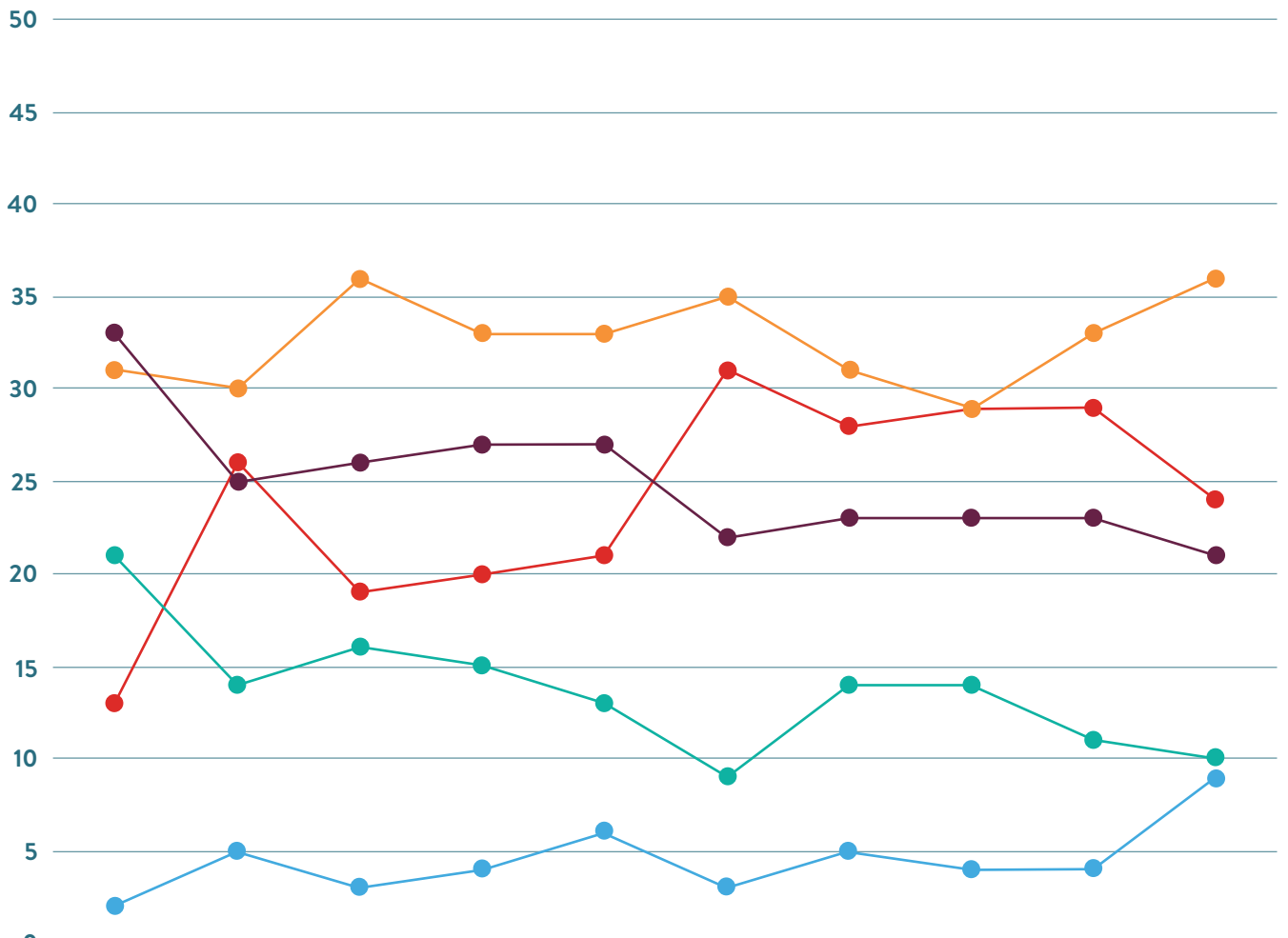
Contact and attitudes

The level of contact reported by respondents with people from minority ethnic groups has gradually increased over time, as shown in Figure 3. Only 13% of respondents in 2008 reported that they very often socialised or played

sport with people from another ethnic background. That figure had increased to around three in ten by 2016 and remained stable around the 30% mark until 2019. The drop in the 2020/21 survey could be an effect of the COVID19 pandemic which, generally, curtailed opportunities

to socialise. One in ten respondents in the 2020/21 survey reported that they never socialised or played sport with someone from a different ethnic background. This proportion has halved since 2008 when that question was first asked.

Figure 3: How often do you socialise or play sport with people from a different ethnic background? By survey year (%)



	2008	2009	2011	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020/21
Very often	13	26	19	20	21	31	28	29	29	24
Sometimes	31	30	36	33	33	35	31	29	33	36
Rarely	33	25	26	27	27	22	23	23	23	21
Never	21	14	16	15	13	9	14	14	11	10
I don't know	2	5	3	4	6	3	5	4	4	9

● Very often
 ● Sometimes
 ● Rarely
 ● Never
 ● I don't know

The survey data show a relationship between rurality and the extent of contact respondents have with people from different ethnic backgrounds. In YLT 2020/21, 29% of those living in big cities reported that they very often socialised or played sport with people from different ethnic backgrounds, but only 17% of those who lived in homes in the country and 20% of those who lived in country villages reported this. Those who lived in small cities or suburbs of big cities reported a similar contact pattern as those in large cities. Interestingly, the proportion of those who said they never socialised or played sport with people of different ethnic backgrounds was also highest amongst those who lived in big cities (17%). Those who lived in mixed-religion neighbourhoods were much more likely to say they socialised very often with people from different ethnic communities than those who lived in predominantly both Protestant and Catholic areas (31%, 25% and 19% respectively).

Statistically, frequent socialising with people from other ethnic backgrounds is strongly related to more positive attitudes. 41% of those who said they very often socialised and played sport with people from other ethnic backgrounds said that they felt very favourably towards people from minority ethnic communities. This compares with 30% of those who sometimes socialised with people of other ethnic backgrounds and 22% who rarely or never did so.

Attitudes to refugees

Since 2017, YLT has asked respondents two questions directly related to refugees. Firstly, to what extent they agree or disagree that ‘Northern Ireland is a society that welcomes refugees escaping persecution’; and secondly, ‘It is our duty to provide protection to refugees escaping persecution in their home country’. As detailed in Table 1, in 2020/21 31% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that Northern Irish society welcomed refugees, an increase of five percentage points since the question was first asked in 2017. Respondents who attended Secondary schools (36%) were much more likely to agree or strongly agree that this was the case than those from Grammar schools (26%) or Planned Integrated

schools (25%). Grammar school students were most likely to disagree or strongly disagree (28%).

As detailed in Table 1, nearly two-thirds of respondents (64%) felt it is our duty to provide protection to refugees. In this respect, 74% of respondents attending Grammar schools agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, compared to 59% of respondents attending Secondary schools and 47% of respondents attending Planned Integrated schools. The level of contact with people from minority ethnic groups was relevant in

this regard. Respondents who very often socialised or played sports with people from minority ethnic backgrounds were most likely to agree strongly (40%) that it is our duty to provide protection to refugees, compared to 24% who said they never socialised in this way. 16-year olds who never socialised with people from minority ethnic communities, in turn, were most likely to disagree or strongly disagree (19% overall) that this is our duty as society. This compares to just 8% of those who very often socialised or played sport with people from minority ethnic communities.

Table 1: Respondents who agree/strongly agree with the following statements YLT 2017 – 2020/21

	%			
	2017	2018	2019	2020/21
Northern Ireland is a society that welcomes refugees escaping persecution in their home country	26	26	28	31
It is our duty to provide protection to refugees escaping persecution in their home country	60	57	58	64

Respondents who regarded themselves as belonging to a religion were much more likely than those who did not to agree that Northern Ireland is a welcoming society for refugees (36% and 23% respectively). As detailed in Figure

4, Catholic respondents were most likely to agree or strongly agree that this was the case, with Protestant respondents being slightly more likely to agree than disagree, and those with no religious affiliation most likely to disagree (31%).

Figure 4: Respondents agreeing or disagreeing that Northern Ireland is a society that welcomes refugees escaping persecution in their home country. (%)

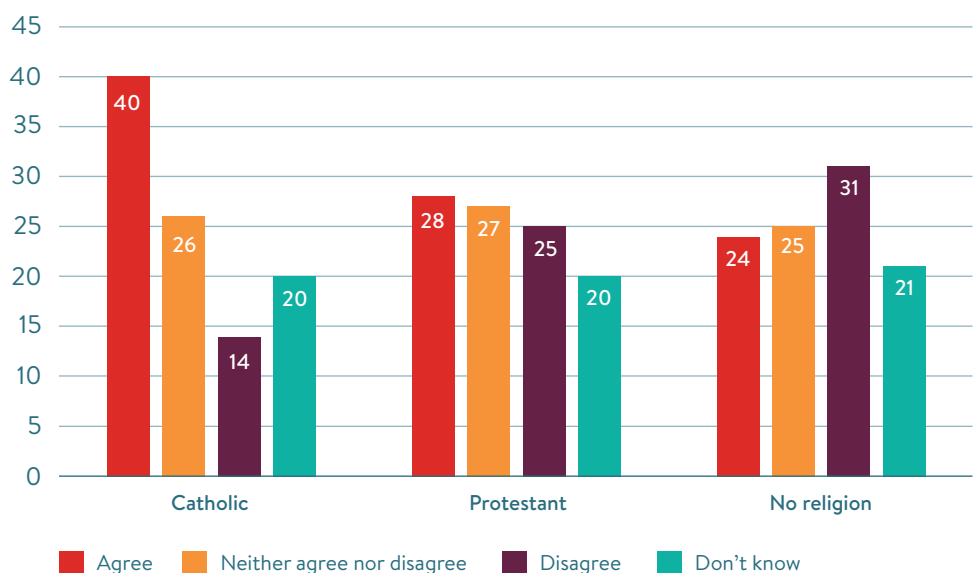


Figure 5 shows that Protestant respondents were significantly less likely than those from a Catholic background or with no religious affiliation to say that it is our duty to provide protection to refugees.

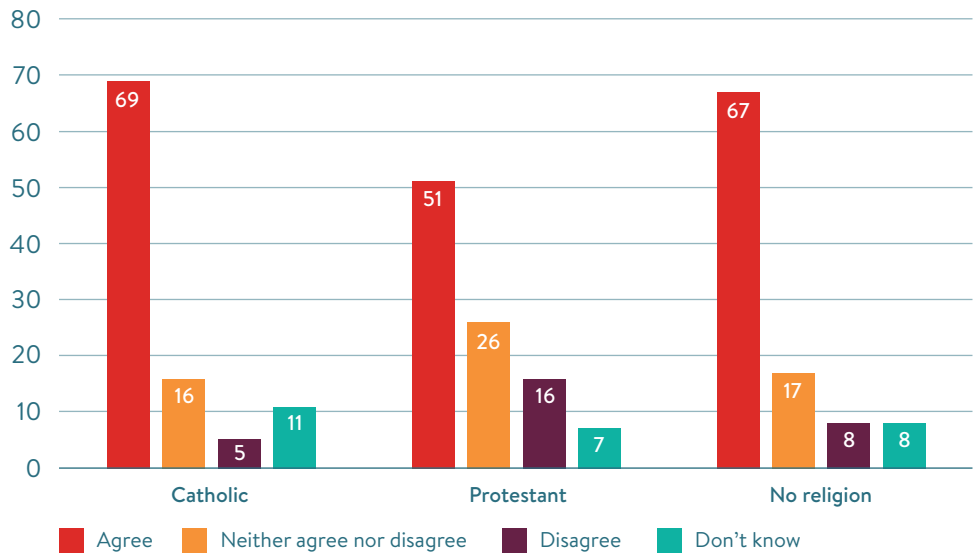
Those who had witnessed any kind of racist bullying or harassment in their school were significantly more likely to disagree that Northern Ireland is a welcoming society for refugees than respondents who had never witnessed racist bullying or harassment (29% and 18% respectively). Those who had witnessed racist bullying or harassment in their school were also more likely to **strongly** agree that it is our duty to provide protection to refugees who are escaping persecution in their home country (34% compared to 25%).

Overall, 46% in the 2020/21 survey reported having personally witnessed racist bullying or harassment in their school. In 2008, when this question was first asked in YLT, the proportion of young people reporting this was only 35%. This question was asked every year since 2014 when the proportion stood at 39%, and the reporting of racism has slightly increased since then. One reason

Conclusion and key points

It is clear that displacement of large groups of people due to war, conflict and environmental disasters is a global issue which is likely to increase. Northern Ireland is likely to see a significant increase in the number of displaced people and families seeking refuge and/or asylum. Whilst a general policy commitment is in place that recognises people's rights to protection from conflict, war and environmental disasters, the practical steps to fulfil this commitment, to ensure

Figure 5: Respondents agreeing or disagreeing that it is our duty to provide protection to refugees who are escaping persecution in their home country. By religion (%)



for this could be an actual increase in racist incidents in schools, but another could be a higher level of awareness of racism among 16 year olds. Respondents with no religious affiliation have consistently been more likely to say that they witnessed racist incidents in their schools than respondents with religious backgrounds.

In 2020/21 respondents who attended Planned Integrated schools were more likely to report witnessing incidents of racist harassment and bullying than those in Grammar and Secondary schools (59%, 43% and 46% respectively). Again, this does not necessarily mean that more racist incidents occurred in Integrated than Grammar or Secondary schools.

migrants' and asylum seekers' needs are being met in practice when they arrive, requires regular monitoring and evaluation.

Generally, YLT found that young people in Northern Ireland hold positive attitudes towards minority ethnic groups and asylum seekers. The perception of whether or not Northern Ireland is a welcoming country for those who seek refuge varied. The evidence from YLT

suggests that positive attitudes are linked to higher levels of contact. In light of the predictably growing number of asylum seekers and refugees who will settle in Northern Ireland, programmes that encourage and foster contact between young people, who have grown up in Northern Ireland and identify as Irish or British citizens and asylum seekers/refugees, can support integration and good relations and tackle any underlying racism and stereotypes.

Key Points:

- Contact of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland with people from minority ethnic communities has gradually increased. In 2020/21, only 10% of YLT respondents reported they never socialised with people from minority ethnic backgrounds.
- There is a positive relationship between the level of contact with, and positive attitudes towards, people from minority ethnic communities
- In 2020/21, 64% of YLT respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it is our duty to provide protection to refugees escaping persecution in their home country. However, in the same survey year only 31% agreed or strongly agreed that Northern Ireland is a society that welcomes refugees escaping persecution in their home country

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The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey is carried out annually and records the opinions of 16-year olds in Northern Ireland on a range of social and political issues. In 2020-21, 2,069 16-year olds took part. YLT is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and provides an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey website at www.ark.ac.uk/ylt



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